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ABSTRACT

Recent history textbooks have conspicuously removed references to religion and religious publications, providing a distorted view of American and world history. One such neglected publication, the Boston "Recorder," was founded by Nathaniel Willis in 1816. A Christian newspaper, it was based on three principles: (1) to show theological truth; (2) to put out a concise newspaper, including "the earliest information of all such events as mankind usually deem important;" and (3) to build a circulation among churchgoers and nonchurchgoers alike. The editor's interest in secular and religious information, peculiar for its day, was characterized by specific detail and sensationalist headlines that emphasized human sinfulness and dependence upon God for salvation. It reported natural disasters as retribution from heaven, and tended to focus on God's power rather than that of humans. Despite the newspaper's rapid growth, it was undercut by the development of the Transcendentalist movement, Christian social pessimism, and denominational in-fighting. Under a succession of new editors, the paper focused less on divine intervention in human affairs and the need for salvation, and more often reported people's ability to help themselves. The advent of the penny press and steam driven printing presses finally forced the "Recorder" to merge with the "Puritan" and go out of business. Despite the paper's obscurity, the "Recorder" and religious newspapers like it should be represented fairly in textbooks if they are to provide an accurate understanding of history. (Seventy-three notes are included.) (JC)

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EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY CHRISTIAN LIBERTARIAN NEWSPAPERS: RISE AND DECLINE OF THE BOSTON RECORDER, 1816-1849

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EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY CHRISTIAN LIBERTARIAN NEWSPAPERS:

RISE AND DECLINE OF THE BOSTON RECORDER, 1816-1849

A recent study by New York University Professor Paul Vitz found that the vast majority of elementary and high school textbooks avoid reference to religion.[1] Vitz found American history textbooks defining pilgrims as "people who make long trips" and fundamentalists as rural people who "follow the values or traditions of an earlier period." One textbook listed 300 important events in American history, but only three of the 300 had anything to do with religion. A world history textbook left out any mention of the Protestant Reformation. A literature textbook changed a sentence of Nobel Prize laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer from "Thank God" to "Thank goodness."[2]

Standard journalism history textbooks provide similar distortions in their accounts of early nineteenth century newspapers. The most-used textbook, Emery and Emery's The Press and America, discusses the low circulation of newspapers prior to the 1830s and notes that "only in the religious field was circulation impressive" -- but there is no description of those religious newspapers.[3] There is no mention of the New York Christian Advocate, then the largest circulation weekly in the country (25,000 subscribers in 1828, 30,000 in 1830).[4] There is

no mention of the Boston Recorder, which had the second largest circulation in that city and was known to contemporary editors throughout the country for its "interesting and useful matter."[5]

Other textbooks are similarly blindered.[6] That is a shame, and not only because of the historical distortion thus produced. An early nineteenth century Christian newspaper such as the Boston Recorder was interesting not only for the circulation it obtained, but for its human interest reporting and "Christian libertarian" attitudes, as defined below. This article, based on reading or scanning of every issue of the Boston Recorder from its initial publication in 1816 to its demise (through a merger with the Puritan) in 1849, attempts to shed some light on one leading newspaper of a neglected tradition.

Establishing "a proper newspaper"

Nathaniel Willis, born in 1780 and trained as a printer, came of age journalistically during the Democratic-Republican vs. Federalist political slashing that characterized the Sedition Act period and Jefferson administrations (1798-1808).[7] As editor from 1803 on of a Jeffersonian paper, the Portland (Maine) Eastern Argus, Willis practiced the bitter partisan journalism that characterized many newspapers in what Frank Luther Mott called the "dark ages" of American journalism.[8] Willis had no particular theological interests; as he wrote later, "I had not attended church for many months, but spent my Sabbaths in roving about the fields and in reading newspapers."[9]

At age 27, though, Willis' life changed. He went to hear what he thought would be a political speech by a minister, but

the minister discussed Biblical basics. Willis, in his own words, "was much interested, and became a constant hearer. He wrote, "The Holy Spirit led me to see that there is an eternity; that it was my duty to attend to the concerns of my soul -- that the Bible is the Word of God -- that Christ is the only Saviour, and that it is by grace we are saved, through faith."[10]

The new vision changed Willis' life. First he "began to moderate the severity of party spirit in the Argus, and extracted from other papers short articles on religious subjects."[11] He wanted to make the Argus an explicitly Christian newspaper, but local politicians who had backed the newspaper were opposed, and Christians in Maine did not encourage him. Willis then gave up the Argus and moved to Boston. He opened up a print shop there and investigated the journalistic marketplace.[12]

Some newspapers, Willis found, were largely political and commercial, others largely church organs specializing in ecclesiastical news. Willis closely analyzed three religious weeklies in particular and would not even count them as newspapers, for "A proper newspaper... contains secular news, foreign and domestic, and advertisements."[13] With co-editor Sidney Morse, Willis then produced the first issue of the Boston Recorder on January 3, 1816.[14] He had three ends in mind, according to the Prospectus published that day: To show theological truth; to put out a concise newspaper (including "the earliest information of all such events as mankind usually deem important") rather than a set of religious sermonettes; and to build circulation among churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike.[15]

Such a statement, and the manner in which it was put into practice, was unusual in its emphasis on appealing to all comers while emphasizing a particular set of presuppositions. It was also innovative in its emphasis on tight writing and specific detail. American journalism had begun in the seventeenth century largely as a sermon and tract printing service. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century some newspapers printed, instead of long sermons, long political essays and long-winded speeches.[16] The Recorder was not immune to the hot air tradition, but Willis also pioneered with sensational human interest stories that, except for their underlying pedagogical purpose, anticipated the excitement of the penny press.

For example, the Boston Recorder's 1822 story, "EARTHQUAKE AT ALEPPO," included both a first-person account of destruction in Syria and an overall report. Benjamin Barker, a missionary with the talent of a journalist, wrote that he was racing down the stairs of a crumbling house when another shock sent him flying through the air, his fall broken when he landed on a dead body. He saw:

> men and women clinging to the ruined walls of their houses, holding their children in their trembling arms; mangled bodies lying under my feet, and piercing cries of half buried people assailing my ears; Christians, Jews, and Turks, were imploring the Almighty's mercy in their respective tongues, who a minute before did not perhaps acknowledge him.[17]

The Recorder's overall report continued the theme of sudden destruction. It began with a description of the poor but peaceful city of 200,000 that Aleppo then was, with "nothing remarkable in the weather, or in the state of the atmosphere." But "in ten or twelve seconds" the city was turned into "heaps of

ruins," with "hundreds of decrepit parents half-buried in the ruins, imploring the succor of their sons," and "distracted mothers frantically lifting heavy stones from heaps that covered the bodies of lifeless infants."[18]

Other foreign correspondents of the Recorder also emphasized human interest and sensation. Poignant tales of the misery of an aged king of France[19] alternated with the grizzly bizarre, as in this report of Napoleonic War results:

> More than a million bushels of human and inhuman bones, were imported last year, from the continent of Europe into the port of Hull. The neighborhood of Leipsic, Austerlitz, and Waterloo, and all of the places, where during the late bloody war, the principal battles were fought, have been swept alike, of the bones of the horse and his rider, and shipped to England, where steam engines have been erected, with powerful machinery, for the purpose of granulating them. In this condition they are sent chiefly to Poncaster, one of the largest agricultural markets, and sold to farmers to manure their lands.[20]

A battle report from the Turkish war against the Greeks noted that many soldiers were "impaled alive and roasted. The whole town is destroyed, and the dead bodies, arms and legs scattered over the whole city."[21]

Such specific detail is not exactly what many would expect from a "religious newspaper"; some modern church-related publications have shrunk from examination of deeds of darkness, and have therefore gained reputations for dullness.[22] Willis, though, employed specific detail in treatment of domestic as well as international news. A typical article headlined "Shocking Homicide" gave grisly details on how a man had killed his own son after being "for a long time troubled with irreligious fears, and a belief that his sins were too numerous to be pardoned."[23]

Willis also reported stories such as "Infanticide -- The body of a newly born infant, dead, and nearly naked, was lately found on the beach."[24]

From 1830 onwards, sensation also was used to promote the anti-slavery movement. One article on the slave trade showed how it was possible:

> for such a number of human beings to exist packed up and wedged together as tight as they could cram in low cells, three feet high, the greater part of which, except that immediately under the grated hatchways, was shut out from light or air, and this when the thermometer exposed in the open sky, was standing in the shade on our deck, at 89 degrees.[25]

A description of the burning of one rebellious black noted that he had been chained to a tree and set on fire: "The shrieks and groans of the victim were loud and piercing, and to observe one limb after another drop into the fire, was awful indeed."[26]

Politics and Government Relations

Recent journalism history textbooks, mirroring our contemporary preoccupations, tend to be Washington-centric in their coverage of newspaper interaction with government. Emery and Emery, when they argue that "the most important press development" during the early nineteenth century "was in government reporting," spotlight Washington newspapers such as the National Intelligencer and the Globe.[27] Washington reportage justifiably dominates current front pages, given the great influence of the federal government, but that is not the way it was early in the nineteenth century. Then, the word "government" had different connotations, ones that not only emphasized the

local over the national, but, even more startlingly given our present tendencies, the informal over the official.[28]

Some theological background is needed to understand the Recorder's political tendencies. The New Testament teaches Christians to subject themselves "to the governing authorities"[29] -- plural. No one governing authority on earth could claim total allegiance. Parents, employers, heads of fraternal and benevolent associations, teachers, church leaders, and so on, were all representatives of different types of governing authority; civil government in Washington or the state capitals was just one more form of government among many. Recorder essays argued that civil government has strictly limited jurisdiction, and should be turned to only for defense or punishment of crime.[30]

This political philosophy -- we could call it "Christian libertarian" -- heavily influenced the reporting of the Recorder from 1816 through the mid-1830s. Throughout that period the Recorder, upon identifying major social problems, argued that family, church, and benevolent society, not civil government, should take leadership in dealing with them. Recorder essays argued that man's sin required diffusion of power and decentralization; comparing God's holiness to man's depravity, they concluded that man could hardly be trusted to rule himself politically, and could not be trusted to rule others, so the less civil government, the better.[31]

Instead, Recorder recommendations anticipated what Alexis de Tocqueville was to note in Democracy in America in 1835:

Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all

> dispositions constantly form associations.... If it is proposed to inculcate some truth or to foster some feeling by the encouragement of a great example, they form a society.... what political power could ever [do what Americans voluntarily] perform every day with the assistance of the principle of association.[32]

The Recorder during the 1820s had much more coverage of voluntary associations than it did of developments on Capitol Hill or Beacon Hill.

Coverage of a serious social problem of the early nineteenth century, duelling, illustrates the Recorder's Christian libertarianism. Typically, the Recorder would give specific detail on a duel and its bloody results, and then note that "The above mentioned murder shows the folly of resorting to a duel to settle differences... what madness it is to continue the practice, attended by such dreadful consequences."[33] The Recorder, though, never proposed federal or state governmental action to deal with the problem. Instead, the Recorder frequently used three other anti-duelling devices.

First, since family was seen as one type of government, the Recorder argued frequently that potential duellists should bow before the wishes of parents, spouses and children, rather than satisfying their own vanity. Many stories of parental request to avoid duels were given, and tales of motherly mourning over sons who had violated their wishes also were frequent.[34] One article in 1823 began with one man challenging another to a duel. The challenged man accepted, on condition that they should breakfast together at his house before going out to fight. After breakfast, the challenger asked if the host was ready:

> "No sir," replied he, "not till we are more upon a par: that amiable woman, & those six innocent children, who

> just now breakfasted with us, depend solely upon my life for subsistence -- and till you can stake something equal in my estimation to the welfare of seven persons, dearer to me than the apple of my eye, I cannot think we are equally matched." "We are not indeed!" replied the other, giving him his hand.[35]

Second, since voluntary associations, schools, churches, and businesses also were viewed by Christian libertarians as units of government, the Recorder encouraged these to criticize duellists at every opportunity; newspapers, for their part, were encouraged to print names of all those involved in duels.[36] In opposition to those who saw duelling as heroic activity, the Recorder suggested that societal leaders should poke fun at duellists at every opportunity. One of its own stories told of a man awaiting his opponent's arrival, until "he observed some bushes near him shaking, and supposing it was his adversary skulking," fired. The man found out he had shot a cow.[37]

Third, since all authority came from God, the Recorder argued that Christians governed by God's law, not their own, would avoid situations in which they might commit murder. Perhaps the most publicized duel of the period came in 1820 when Admiral Stephen Decatur fought and died. Many newspapers mourned, but the Recorder was pointed in its criticism:

> The brave Decatur, who was ever ready to launch his country's thunder against his country's enemy, and who was calm and fearless in the very tempest of battle, -- the brave DECATUR, grew pale at the thought, that a man who sought his blood, might post his name as a coward! [He forgot]... that there is no honor, which is valuable and durable, save that which comes from God.[38]

Other accounts of duelling also emphasized man's responsiblity before God, not civil government.[39]

Success

With interesting coverage and analysis, Recorder circulation rose from 500 for its early issues in January, 1816, to 1,100 six months later and 1,300 in January, 1817, apparently putting it in second place among Boston weekly newspapers at that time, just behind the Centinel.[40] Selling at the then-standard price of six cents for a four-page issue, Recorder circulation was said to reach 3,500 in 1822.[41] Willis and Morse attributed success to God's blessings on their combination of theological insight and hard news coverage; as Morse put it, "The engrafting of religious intelligence upon the common newspaper" had gained "the attention of the public and particularly of newspaper editors."[42]

Overall, about half of the Boston Recorder during its first fifteen years contained news not specifically church-related -- such as information about accidents, crimes, marriages, deaths, and acts of Congress -- while the other half concentrated on church activities. It would be a mistake to say, though, that part of the paper was secular and the rest religious, for all of it emphasized God's activity. For Willis, all kinds of stories provided "occasion to record many signal triumphs of divine grace over the obduracy of the human heart, and over the prejudices of the unenlightened mind." The Recorder, he wrote, was a record of "these quickening influences of the Holy Spirit."[43]

A clear theological vision underlay the Recorder's style of reporting. Willis, like other Christians within the classical Reformed (sometimes called "Calvinist") tradition, stressed God's sovereignty over all human activities. He saw no real distinction between religious and secular news, because in both

spheres the spiritual was every bit as real as the material. The Aleppo earthquake, for example, did not just happen: The Recorder viewed it as a Heaven-sent general punishment for sin, one that would allow survivors opportunity for new reconciliation with God.

Recorder news reports on Aleppo explicitly carried such a message: In the destroyed city many persons were seen "falling on their knees and imploring the mercy of God; and shortly after crowding the places of worship, eager to learn what they must do to be saved."[44] The Recorder's description of the earthquake culminated in an editorial plea:

> Should not these awful demonstrations of divine power cause us to fear Him who can so suddenly sweep away a whole city into destruction? Should not sinners tremble to think how awful it is to have such a God for an enemy? Should they not immediately seek reconciliation to Him through the Blood of the Lamb?[45]

Recoveries from illness also were reported as acts of God.[46] God was seen to answer prayers, not by making Christians feel better psychologically, but by actually transforming earthly situations.[47]

Recorder editors and writers evidently believed they were doing God's work in communicating such ideas. They seemed pleased with their accomplishments, and the Recorder prominently quoted one journalist's view that "A religious writer of popular talents, and of a forcible style, could have no station of more extensive usefulness than the direction of a weekly newspaper. Neither the pulpit nor the senate house could afford him a more various or more ample field."[48] A minister wrote that a minister who wanted to teach about Christ "can spend a part of his time no

better, than pleading the cause of religious periodicals."[49]

Ironically, though, at the height of the Recorder's success, the classical Reformed views that sustained it were under strong attack from several different directions.

Attacks

One attack arose from the descendants of those liberalizing influences that in the late eighteenth century had yanked Harvard College from its classical Reformed roots and tossed it toward Unitarianism. The Recorder was accustomed to dealing with Unitarianism, and its issues during the 1820s and early 1830s were filled with articles decrying the faith that emphasized man's goodness rather than his original sin.[50] In 1831, though, a published list of leading Recorder supporters included a young minister who signed his name Ralph Emerson and would within a few years raise a far more lively challenge than the dry, rationalistic Unitarians could put forward.[51]

Emerson, who soon began using his middle name of Waldo, was filled with misgivings about administering the Lord's supper while doubting Christ's divinity. He resigned his post in 1832 and became famous four years later with an essay entitled Nature. At that time he also became a founding member of the Transcendental Club; members included fellow Harvard graduates (and future newspaper editors) George Ripley and Charles Dana. From that time on, some of New England's writing talent would be removed from, and often antagonistic to, the Boston Recorder; others who had been influenced by Transcendentalism would no

longer regard the Bible as the standard by which ideas and movements should be judged.[52]

Transcendentalism influenced not only religion and literature, but politics. Christian libertarianism, based on the concept of man's original sin with its implication that civil government could do little to make things better, gave way before a view of man as possessing unlimited potential that a strong and benevolent state could help to liberate. Soon many newspapers were crusading for civil government involvement in development of liberal schools, a stronger economy, and a sober citizenry. Among intellectuals and many members of the upper and middle classes, the Christian libertarian idea of multiple governments often was ignored in a rush to bring state power to bear on the side of perceived righteousness.[53]

With the elite heading one way, a second threat to the Recorder arose from the growing social pessimism among other Christians. The mid-1830s saw a strong advance for the pre-millennial belief that the general culture would become worse and worse until Christ's Second Coming, and that very little could be done to stay the downward drift. Pre-millennial revivalists helped to bring many into the church, but with a pietistic doctrine (Whew! Glad I'm saved!") rather than a strong sense of God's sovereignty over all areas of human life, and a desire to build social institutions that would show "the Lordship of Christ."[54]

Clearly, pre-millennialism would cut into enthusiasm for the Recorder's attempt to be a light to non-Christians as well as

Christians, and to teach Christians how to have a positive impact not just on individuals, but on whole societies. From the mid-1830s onward the Recorder began devoting less space to non-church events, and editors of some other Christian newspapers began doing the same. For example, in 1830 underwriters of one Presbyterian paper, the Philadelphian, complained, "Too much secular news," and backers of the New York Evangelist decreed, "Political and secular news belongs in secular papers."[55]

A host of other changes affected the Recorder. Leading colleges such as Harvard no longer had a Christian emphasis. Denominational infighting was on the rise; in particular, the once solid Presbyterian church was splitting into Old and New School factions. But, through the 1830s and 1840s, Recorder editors appear to have been steadying themselves primarily against a Transcendentalist pull for reform (generally not along biblical lines) and a pietistic push for less concern with social problems.

Those two pressures worked in different, and sometimes opposite directions. One possible middle course between the two was to stop dealing with many areas of life, pick one or two (which might or might not be biblical) for crusading, and spend the rest of the available space on specific church news. Such a course would be even more likely if members of the classical Reformed tradition, under attack from several directions, were concerned about over-extending their organizational ability.[56] They might then decide to circle the wagons around traditional ecclesiastical structures.

Decline

The above, as applied to the Boston Recorder during the mid-1830s, is speculative; we have no record of the thinking of the Recorder editors during those years other than what is found in their newspaper. Willis had relinquished active control of the Recorder by then and would soon sell his share; a succession of little-known editors during the period from 1830 to 1845 included Calvin Stowe, Joseph Tracy, Ferdinand Andrews, Erasmus Moore, Richard Storrs and Martin Moore. These editors were not (at least on the Recorder's pages) as open and explicit concerning their objectives as Willis had been.[57]

Those pages from the mid-1830s onward, though, do indicate a growing tension. The Recorder announced that it would emphasize "articles relating to religous doctrine and practice" designed "to promote personal holiness and benevolence."[58] Editors pledged to cover "all subjects proper for a religious paper" but to "omit many things which some other papers publish."[59] Willis had been all for promotion of holiness, but the new emphasis left out his original sense of reaching out to probe and communicate with a broad audience.

Soon, pious generalization tended to replace specific detail and colorful reporting. Headlines directed particularly at clergymen, such as "THE CHOICE OF A WIFE, OR HINTS TO MINISTERS, began to appear. (The main hint: Do not wait for physical beauty, but find a woman of good character and marry her fast.)[60] At the same time, the Recorder began to express scorn for non-church aspects of culture and considerable self-satisfaction with

the activities of Christendom. For example, in 1840 a typical Recorder report on a benevolence society designed to aid widows and orphans quoted one beneficiary saying of contributors, "I feel as if I could take my fatherless babes, and fall down at their feet in thankfulness."[61]

That story of 1840 also showed a switch from God-centeredness to man-centeredness. Twenty years earlier the Recorder would have been embarassed to report a person bowing before man in thankfulness rather than before God; perhaps it would even have quoted the apostle Paul's line from the book of Acts, "We too are only men, human like you."[62] But in 1840 the Recorder printed the words of a minister telling contributors that "your bounty has kept [widows and orphans] from freezing, from starvation, or the alms-house... with united voice they said, we thank you."[63] The sense of praising God from whom all blessings flow was gone.

From the mid-1830s on the Recorder also moved away from Christian libertarianism, most notably in its crusading for the early version of the prohibition movement, then called "temperance." Editors downplayed the concept of man's natural sinfulness and suggested that environmental factors such as economic trends or alchohol were primary causes of misery.[64] The prohibitionist movement was particularly unbiblical in its contention that civil government should ban something clearly allowed in the Bible (drinking of wine in moderation was facilitated by Jesus and recommended to Timothy by Paul) simply because some might abuse it.[65] Nevertheless, the Recorder began campaigning for civil government prosecution of tavern-keepers:

"PUT THE RUMSELLERS IN PRISON," it screamed.

By the mid-1840s, clearly, the Recorder had lost or was losing three of its distinctives: a desire to report general interest news, a contextualizing of that news through the classical Reformed stress on man's sin and God's sovereignty, and a Christian libertarian view of the political and social process.

Last Years

The Recorder's decline in editorial vigor occurred while the effects of the journalistic revolution known as "the rise of the penny press" were beginning to be felt in Boston. Just as New York editors such as James Gordon Bennett and Horace Greeley were covering almost every area of life in lively fashion, and presenting their findings for a penny (the drastic reduction in price made possible by advertising revenues tied to circulation increase), so the Boston Daily Times and other new penny papers were satisfying, and perhaps creating, appetitites for more information about the world.

In the 1820s, the Recorder had prided itself on covering enough so that a person who subscribed to no other newspaper would be in touch with leading developments in New England and the world. For the Recorder to continue that service in the late 1830s and the 1840s would have required expansion, perhaps to a daily or at least a semi-weekly, in the face of the ecclesiastical forces pushing for contraction. The Recorder just was not up to it. While everywhere around it the journalistic revolution was surging, the Recorder stayed

virtually the same in typography, size, frequency of publication, and so on.

There were occasional stirrings. Editors publicly made plans to enlarge the Recorder in 1841, only to announce that the promise had not been kept because supporters had called such an enlargement "unnecessary and inconvenient."[67] Editors, recognizing that the Recorder had become second-rate, sometimes ran apologetic notices: "If we do not spread all the sail of some of our competitors, we hope we shall still be able to furnish a sound and safe craft."[68] In 1844, apologies were tinged with self-righteous refusals to change "for the sake of popularity."[69]

The Recorder in 1845 reprinted from the New York Sun an article describing that newspaper's progress since its emergence in 1833 as the first successful penny paper: The Sun had expanded its circulation from 500 to 38,000, its employment from two to 600, its printing capacity from one small hand press to "five double cylinder presses driven by the power of steam," and so on.[70] Meanwhile, the Recorder was printed much as it had been three decades before, with a circulation and staff not much larger than that of 1822. The Recorder had endured -- no small feat at a time when most newspapers went out of business within several years -- but it had not satisfied the hopes expressed in Willis' prospectus of 1816.

A Recorder editorial in 1848 suggesting "encouraging prospects" for the newspaper was belied by both appearance and content.[71] Type size was smaller, typography was muddy, and page size had decreased; those pages were filled with monthly,

quarterly and annual reports of various church groups, indicating clearly that the Recorder had died as a newspaper and become a public relations organ.[72] Recorder articles depicted individuals who seemed overwhelmingly decent, cooperative, responsible, and benevolent. Happy talk of that sort hardly left the impression that man is a fallen creature desperately in need of Christ. The refusal to cover evil also led to a certain dullness of copy, because without real villains there is little real drama.

In 1849 the Recorder officially merged with the Puritan, a ten-year old newspaper. Examination of one advertisement in the last issue of the Recorder, though, makes the agreement seem more like a subscription list buyout than a merger. The little notice, placed by the Recorder itself, offered "the type and other printing materials which are now used in this office -- the whole comprising all the fixtures of a weekly newspaper establishment."[73]

Conclusion

For two decades after its birth in 1816, the Recorder had merged incisive commentary with human interest reporting in a way that anticipated Bennett and Greeley. Their theology, of course, was very different. Greeley would campaign for civil government involvement in a variety of fields, and would cover events with no suggestion that God's hand was present. Greeley's style of coverage and crusading, not that of the Recorder, set the pattern for mainstream American journalism that has pertained for over a century now.

Given the undistinguished demise ofthe Recorder, it is easy to see why historians ignore it. And yet, the growth of explicitly Christian newspapers in the 1980s makes the subject more relevant than it has been for many years. At the least, if we are to have an accurate history of the press in America during the early decades of the nineteenth century, we must take a new look at Christian newspapers such as the Boston Recorder. We should avoid the tendency to spike the spiritual that has, according to the Vitz study, overwhelmed American textbooks in other fields.

Notes

1 Paul Vitz, Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Children's Textbooks (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1986). Vitz is politically conservative. After his conclusions were released, two liberal groups -- Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, and Norman Lear's People for the American Way -- conducted their own studies. Their results were similar.

2 Ibid,, pp. 20, 40.

3 Edwin and Michael Emery, The Press and America, fifth edition (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984), pp. 109-138 for general discussion of early nineteenth century period; specific quotation on p. 126.

4 Roberta Moore, Development of Protestant Journalism in the United States, 1743-1850 (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Syracuse University, 1968), p. 237.

5 Southern Intelligencer, July 3, 1819, p. 105.

6 The revised edition of Frank Luther Mott's American Journalism (New York: Macmillan, 1950) has one paragraph on page 206 about the "religious newspapers" of the 1801-1833 period. According to Mott, about 100 such publications, scattered across the country, covered both secular events and church activities: The newspapers were "a phenomenon of the times" and "often competed successfully with the secular papers." Mott noted that "many of these papers were conducted with great vigor and ability."

Mott did not go into detail, but his brief mention was more than these newspapers have received in Emery or in these other journalism history textbooks written in the twentieth century: Willard Bleyer, Main Currents in the History of American Journalism (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927); Robert W. Jones, Journalism in the United States (New York: Dutton, 1947); Sidney Kobre, Development of American Journalism (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Co., 1969); Alfred M. Lee, The Daily Newspaper in America (New York: Macmillan, 1937); James M. Lee, History of American Journalism (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1917); George H. Payne, History of Journalism in the United States (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1920).

A history written in the late nineteenth century, Frederic Hudson's Journalism in the United States From 1690 to 1872 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1873), is unsympathetic to the Christian press, but provides some information.

7 Willis had worked in a print shop since he was seven. His father, Nathaniel Willism had from 1776 to 1784 published

the Independent Chronicle in Boston. Willis at 7 was at work folding newsppaers and setting type. He served his apprenticeship in the same room where Benajmin Franklin had worked.

8 Willis spent three months in jail on a politically-motivated libel charge.

9 Boston Recorder, October 21, 1858, p. 167; quoted in Hudson, p. 290.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Morse stayed with the Recorder only one year; he later became editor of the New York Observer. Years later Morse and Willis, and then their children, disagreed as to who had the idea to start the Recorder; Hudson, pp. 294-295, has the details. The evidence points toward Willis.

15 Recorder, January 3, 1816, p. 2.

16 See, for example, issues of the Boston News-Letter, the New England Courant, the Pennsylvania Gazette, the National Intelligencer, and others.

17 Recorder, March 29, 1822, p. 49.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., July 10, 1819, p. 116.

20 Ibid., January 16, 1823, p. 11.

21 Ibid., August 17, 1822, p. 131.

22 Two exceptions to this generalization are a Minneapolis newspaper, Twin Cities Christian, and a Washington-based newspaper, the National Right to Life News.

23 Boston Recorder, September 11, 1819, p. 147.

24 Ibid., January 25, 1823, p. 15.

25 Ibid., August 10, 1831, p. 128.

26 Ibid., May 20, 1836, p. 83.

27 Emery and Emery, p. 118.

28 See Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, vol. 2, book 2, chap. 5; p. 116 in Vintage edition, New York, 1945).

29 Romans 13:1.

30 Even when discussing defense preparations, though, there was opposition to those who demanded constant drilling of the citizenry; such a military draft would be "a real grievance to the people, and a serious public inconvenience and loss." (Sept. 19, 1828, p. 152).

31 By the late 1820s, Recorder essays and sermon extracts were becoming pessimistic in tone. "We are now in imminent danger," the Recorder warned on October 24, 1828 (p. 169). "The very vices which have proved the ruin of other governments, are becoming more and more prevalent among us."

32 De Tocqueville, loc. cit.

33 Boston Recorder, August 18, 1826, p. 131.

34 Ibid., June 22, 1822, p. 100: "The young man succeeded in concealing his intentions from his relatives until it was too late to interpose a check to the fatal meeting. He had a mother. She doted on him. From this mother he was most anxious to conceal his designs. She heard what her son was going to do, but not till it was too late to rescue her darling from the fangs of the murderer. He had received his death shot -- and all the worst apprehensions of his mother were realized, when she saw her boy, only nineteen yeras of age, brought home, pale, bleeding, and just sinking in the cold embrace of death! It was too much for her. The dreadful shock hurled her reason from its throne, and she went mournfully about, pensively asking, 'where's my son -- where's my son?'"

35 Ibid., April 22, 1823, p. 57.

36 Ibid., November 11, 1825, p. 184.

37 Ibid., March 31, 1826, p. 52.

38 Ibid., April 22, 1820, p. 57.

39 Ibid., June 22, 1822, p. 100.

40 New York Observer, June 9, 1849, quoted in Moore, pp. 101-102. Early nineteenth century circulation figures for most Boston weeklies are unavailable. The circulation of New York newspapers in 1816, according to Joel Munsell's Typographical Miscellany (1850) was 2250 for the Mercantile Advertiser, 1750 for the New York Gazette, 1600 for the Evening Post and 1200 for the Commercial Advertiser. (Clarence S. Brigham, Journals and Journeymen (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1950).

41 Boston Recorder, March 29, 1822, p. 49.

42 New York Observer, June 23, 1849.

43 Boston Recorder, December 23, 1817, p. 202.

44 Ibid, March 29, 1822, p. 49.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid, March 15, 1823, p. 41.

47 See, for example, the Recorder's report of God's response to members of an "Infidel Club," January 25, 1823, pp. 13-14.

48 Ibid., December 15, 1830, p. 200.

49 New York Evangelist, December 20, 1834, p. 204.

50 See page 208 of each Recorder volume during the 1820s and early 1830s for a list of such articles. Also see Recorder, January 27, 1837, p. 14.

51 Boston Recorder, December 21, 1831, p. 206.

52 Emerson laid out the Transcendentalist challenge in Nature, and more precisely in his 1838 speech at the Harvard Divinity School: Christianity, he said, speaks "with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus," instead of emphasizing "the moral nature of man, where the sublime is." Humanity, Emerson, proclaimed, "is drinking forever the soul of God" and becoming Godlike itself. Speak no further of man's sin and his responsibility before God, Emerson suggested: Man is God, or at least part of God, because a little bit of godstuff is sprinkled everywhere.

If God is everywhere, though, God is nowhere: Theoretical pantheism could merge nicely with practical materialism. Transcendental thinking was spread in magazines such as The Dial and then popularized through many non-Christian newspapers and magazines. There was no need to report on "God's providence" if news events arose from a combination of natural chance and man's godlike skill.

53 See, for example, Boston Recorder, July 9, 1846, p. 110.

54 A heavy emphasis on revivalism influenced American Christianity from the 1830s on. Evangelists such as Charles Finney accomplished much, but their focus on evangelism tended to be specifically individualistic.

55 Philadelphian, April 23, 1830, p. 67.

56 According to Willis, the Recorder was a profitable

enterprise, largely due to $2.50/year subscriptions. It may not have earned as much as some other newspapers because it refused to accept advertisements "which have a tendency to injure public morals, or to wound private feelings." The Recorder averaged three columns of advertisements during the 1820s and 1830s; the Recorder had four pages of six columns each, so only one-eighth of the newspaper was advertising. Ads on April 20, 1822 (p. 64) were for books, real estate, schools, furniture, dresses, bonnets, shoes, etc. Ads on September 19, 1834 (p. 152) were similar, with schools such as Greenfield High School for Young Ladies, Dorchester Academy, and Ipswich Female Seminary advertised.

57 See, for example, Recorder, December 30, 1842, p. 206.

58 Ibid., January 2, 1835, p. 2.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid., December 21, 1843, p. 201.

61 Ibid., October 30, 1840, p. 173.

62 Acts 14:15.

63 Recorder, op. cit.

64 Ibid., October 23, 1833, p. 172. Also see following issues: October 30, November 7, 14, 21, 28.

65 John 2:1-11; 1 Timothy 5:23. Advocacy of a ban on something which, if consumed in moderation, does not harm, means advocacy of increased state power.

66 Recorder, July 9, 1846, p. 110.

67 Ibid., January 7, 1842, p. 2.

68 Ibid., December 30, 1842, p. 206.

69 Ibid., January 4, 1844, p. 2. Without changing written content, the Recorder at least could have made use of front page drawings. We know it had the capability because once -- only once-- the Recorder used a large front-page woodcut. On Sept 11, 1833, it had a powerful front page story on infanticide in Ceylon, "The Sacrifice of Children to Devils," which noted the death of children as their parents prayed, "O befriend me, thou blood-thirsty devil." Alongside the story was a print of a Ceylonese depiction of a goddess devouring children brought by mothers. More such material perhaps would have gained (and educated) readers.

70 Ibid., January 8, 1845, p. 8.

71 Ibid., January 7, 1848, p. 2.

72 The Recorder also increasingly ignored use of specific detail in reporting, which makes for vivid journalism. For example, a February 7, 1840, article on duelling, rather than giving specific examples, began, "How absurd is the practice of duelling!... absurd, viewed as a punishment; more absurd, viewed as a reparation of injury; altogethr abusrd, in every point of view!... The most specious arguments in its favor, and the most plausible apologies made ofr it, by mere men of the world, when examined een upon worldly principles -- irespective of all relgious and benevolent considerations, will be found utterly without foundation.... How absurd is duelling!" Sermonettes filled with rhetoric were driving out news stories. (p. 28)

73 Ibid., May 4, 1849, p. 71. The Puritan Recorder did not hide its nature as a public relations organ for various Christian groups. The May 31, 1849, was almost entirely fileld with reports of meetings produced by the organizations themselves: American and Foreign Sabbath Union, Foreign Evangelical Society, Prison Discipline Society, Massachusetts Bible Society, American Education Society, American Peace Society, American and Foreign Christian Union, Sabbath School Union, Pastorial Association, Massachuisetts Home Missonary Society, Society for the Promotion of Colleigate and Theological Education at the West, Boston Seamens' Friend Society. There was less than a single column on page three for what had once been the noble experiement of Nathaniel Willis: the Weekly Summary of the major news, contextualized by biblical understanding.

By 1855 the Puritan Recorder was limiting its sights by describing itself as "A Religious and Family Newspaper." Both editors were ministers rather than journalists, and many articles was sermonic; their editorials often disparaged Christian commentary on current events, which they called "Preaching to the Times."